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The Aquarian Confusion: Conflicting Theologies of the New Age

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The Aquarian Confusion: Conflicting Theologies of the New Age

PAUL GREER

ABSTRACT *A number of problems are involved in studying the New Age movement, ranging from the enormous task of dealing with even a fraction of the phenomena associated with it, to the fact that prominent 'New Age' figures wish to dissociate themselves from this label. There is also the growing recognition that the New Age is fraught with contradictory ideas, and this makes the claim of a universally consistent 'New Age worldview' difficult to maintain. The paper seeks to explore such contradictions, with particular reference to theological claims. It is contended that the New Age embraces two antithetical dynamics, termed 'patriarchal' and 'ecological'. The paper concludes with a discussion of problems involved in a definitive characterisation of New Age beliefs.*

Some Problems in the Study of the New Age Movement

All who research the New Age movement appear to agree on one issue: namely, that its diverse components make it extremely difficult to characterise in a final, decisive manner. As Drane comments: the "amazing diversity of the ingredients that go into the New Age mixture will always ensure that any definition we come up with can, with perfectly good reason, be challenged by someone else whose experience of it has been quite different".¹ Further, there appears to be no general consensus as to precisely which 'ingredients' constitute this amorphous phenomenon. Miller holds that a number of religious groups—including the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and Christian Science—should not be considered part of the movement "in spite of the many beliefs they hold in common with it".² Geisler, adopting a more inclusive stance, includes Christian Science, Unity, Baha'i, and Scientology in the "shift from the Old Age humanism to New Age pantheism".³

To add to the confusion, some organisations and individuals identified with the movement seem keen to remove themselves from any such association. The physicist Fritjof Capra, regarded by some as an influential New Age theorist, describes the New Age movement as a particular manifestation of a social "paradigm shift" which flourished in California in the 1970s, and is characterised negatively by the "the total absence of social and political consciousness". The term New Age, he continues, refers to those "who are still New Agers, who are stuck in the consciousness of the 1970s".⁴

Despite such problems of definition, there appears to be no shortage of commentators—Christian ones in particular—for whom terms like 'New Age worldview' and 'New Age spirituality' connote things at once both easily recognisable and universally consistent. Olson speaks for many when he says:

"Though the movement is diverse and dynamic, there seems to be a unifying worldview just as there is a basic unifying worldview underlying the many forms and manifestations of Christianity".⁵ Such views are maintained by some New Age spokespersons themselves, like Bloom who asserts that underlying the apparent diversity, there is "a common general message".⁶

Such opinions are not without criticism. Heelas notes the movement's lack of homogeneity, where some paths "emphasise an individuated form of spirituality", and others, "the spirituality which runs through all that is natural", while still others combine "New Age monism with beliefs to do with external spiritual agencies".⁷ For other commentators, the issue is less one of a lack of homogeneity and more one of fundamental contradictions. Schultz complains that the New Age is fraught with "mutually contradictory ideas". He notes that "'body awareness' and 'earth wisdom' are stressed, but we are told that the 'material world' is the source of pain and suffering and that it is only the disembodied 'spiritual world' that counts".⁸ A similar point is made by Perry. Some New Agers, he observes, hold "that there is nothing but God...and that we partake of divinity by the very fact of existing". On the other hand, some argue for "a series of levels or planes between God and us, and of a hierarchy of Masters and Teachers". Such hierarchism, he notes, is accompanied by the belief that humans "fell" from spirit into matter. The idea of a fall into matter, concludes Perry, "is a far cry from saying that we all partake of divinity and that the earth and the matter in it is as divine as we are".⁹ Contradictions in New Age thinking have also been highlighted by York. York makes a distinction between the New Age and Neo-Paganism, on the grounds that the relationship between the two is "an uneasy one of self-contradicting tensions". Even when Neo-Paganism is excluded from consideration, the New Age still remains in a state of "unresolved dialectic". The unresolved dialectic in the New Age, and between the New Age and Neo-Paganism, is

between the idea of Nature as Real and Nature as Illusion, between the immanentist pagan concept of pantheism and the transcendental gnostic concept of theism, between a numinous materialism and a world-denying idealism.¹⁰

Contradictions as Indicative of Antithetical Theologies

I contend that the contradictions of the New Age are not indications of a lack of homogeneity, but rather, that the movement embraces two practically antithetical types of 'theology', by which I mean beliefs about divinity, humanity, and nature. However, unlike York, I do not think it possible to drive a clear wedge between the New Age and Neo-Paganism, which is problematic, as York acknowledges: "We have pagan New Agers or pagans who identify as New Age and we also have New Agers who entertain pagan metaphors and even what could be identified as pagan or Gaian beliefs".¹¹ The hermeneutical key for differentiating between the two theological dynamics is contained within one of the dynamics. This type of New Age thinking has been variously labelled, i.e. "post-Christian spirituality",¹² "constructive postmodern spirituality",¹³ "New Age nature religion",¹⁴ and, for reasons highlighted later, what I have termed 'ecological theology'. Ecological theology embraces movements and theorists

aligned with what could be called, broadly speaking, the 'ecofeminist' wing of New Age thinking. Included are movements like feminist Wicca, creation-centred spirituality, and theorists like Fritjof Capra, Thomas Berry, Matthew Fox, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Starhawk, Joanna Macy, and Monica Sjoo. Feminists aligned with this New Age dynamic have self-consciously identified themselves with the symbol of the New Age since the 1970s.¹⁵ This link has, however, become increasingly tenuous, as feminists have become more aware of incompatible elements within the movement, and many no longer wish to be identified with it. A good example of this can be found in Monica Sjoo's *New Age & Armageddon*, where an attempt is made to drive a thick wedge between feminist Neo-Pagan Goddess spirituality and the New Age movement. Her work is grounded in the belief that much of the New Age is not new at all, but merely the latest expression of patriarchal consciousness.¹⁶ It is my contention that the term 'patriarchal', as defined by proponents of ecological theology, serves as a useful rubric for a substantial portion of New Age thought. A discussion of the terms 'patriarchal theology' and 'ecological theology' follows.

Patriarchal Theology

For feminists, 'patriarchy' indicates the oppression of women by men in all the institutions of society. In more recent discourse the concept has come to indicate a particular way of organising our view of the world, a particular 'conceptual framework', linked with traditionally male-identified beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions. This framework according to Warren is characterised by three features: dualisms, value-hierarchical thinking, and a logic of domination. Dualistic thought opposes aspects of reality that could be seen as inseparable or complementary. It opposes human to non-human, mind to body, self to other, reason to emotion. Value-hierarchical thinking organises these divisions with the spatial metaphor of up-and-downness, and gives greater value to that regarded as higher. It puts self 'up' and other 'down', men 'up' and women 'down', minds 'up' and bodies 'down', the human 'up' and the non-human 'down'. Value-hierarchical thinking gives rise to a 'logic of domination', a way of thinking which explains and justifies the subordination of all the 'downs' by all the 'ups'.¹⁷ In feminist discourse, this framework is linked to a particular view of the male self—the self as an autonomous, constant, enclosed entity that is cut off from its surrounding environment. Keller terms this dualistic understanding of the self the "separative self",¹⁸ and Stewart describes it as "the antithesis of the ecologic way of viewing reality".¹⁹

Ecofeminists further contend that the patriarchal framework is deeply embedded in the Western religious heritage. According to Ruether, classical Christianity, under the influence of Platonic philosophy, divided reality "into a dualism of transcendent Spirit...and inferior and dependent, physical nature". Things of the spirit were regarded as "higher" and of greater value than things of a physical nature, and gender became the primary metaphor for the dualism of transcendence and immanence, spirit and matter: "Whereas the male is seen essentially as the image of the male transcendent ego or God, woman is seen as the image of the lower, material nature". The physical environment was not only regarded as a realm of ontological inferiority, but also as imprisoning the male soul/mind and subjecting it to the torments of the passions. Liberation became

liberation from a world of finitude and flux; a “flight of the mind from nature and body to a spiritual (disembodied) realm”. Women, as the representatives of the world, were viewed as “the bearers of death, from which male spirit must flee to “light and life” ”.²⁰ At the end of the Hellenistic era, religion had been transformed from a powerful source for social renewal to a quest for personal transcendence, salvation, and infinitisation, and the earth “ceased to be seen as man’s true home”.²¹ One of the most world-fleeing forms of spirituality to emerge during this period was Gnosticism. Jonas describes it as a “revolt against the world”, a “violent denunciation of the physical universe”.²² Similarities between Gnosticism and New Age theology and spirituality have been noted since the early 1980s.²³ At the heart of Gnosticism lies a typically patriarchal view of the “true” self—a separate essence that is capable of full extraction from the world. Indeed, it has “fallen” from a world above into this one, and its salvation lies in return, brought about by the realisation of one’s divine nature. The separate self owes no allegiance to the moral or social conventions of this world, which are merely instruments of oppression invented by the demonic powers which rule the fallen, physical cosmos. I will now consider three contemporary New Age examples of this type of patriarchal theology—the Lectorium Rosicrucianum, the New Age vision of George Trevelyan, and finally, the teachings of a disembodied entity called Ramtha, channelled by J. Z. Knight.

The Lectorium Rosicrucianum

The Lectorium Rosicrucianum, or International School of the Golden Rosycross, is a New Age organisation which originated in Holland in the 1950s. This organisation has centres in Holland, England, North America and New Zealand. The Rosycross Press publishes a wide range of books and a bi-monthly magazine entitled *Pentagram*, which “aims to draw its readers to the new Era which has begun for mankind”.

According to the Lectorium, reality can be divided into two distinct realms—the transitory and the eternal. The transitory world, or the “world of wrath”, consists of the visible, material world and an invisible “hereafter”, where the soul rests prior to reincarnation. The transitory world cannot lead us to God; it is a “house of bondage under the law”, i.e. the law of Moses and the Old Testament. Liberation is escape from “the iron grip of this world”, this “great prison”, and the soul’s return to “the Light-Realm, the original Kingdom of God”. To accomplish this task, the individual needs to discover his or her inner “principle of Eternity” which unites humanity with divinity. In the material world, most humans are unaware that they possess this inner divine spark, that they are of “divine origin”. Humans need gnosis or spiritual knowledge to awaken this faculty, which in turn will allow them to attain “universal consciousness” and join the “new race”. After September 2001, the new race will leave the regions of “time and space” and “disappear from sight”. Its destination is “the Lord in the clouds of heaven”. For the Lectorium Rosicrucianum, the New Age, and the gnosis that will bring it about, have little to do with this world: “One cannot on the one hand strive diligently for the goods of this world, and on the other expect to inherit the Kingdom of God”.²⁴

George Trevelyan

The dualistic and value-hierarchical tenor of this Dutch New Age movement is echoed in the writings of George Trevelyan. Trevelyan is an influential New Age spokesperson and theorist, responsible for the founding of the Wrekin Trust, and associated with the Findhorn foundation in Scotland. He has been called the 'father' of the British New Age movement, and his writings have been described as 'a keystone in the Temple of New Age Thought'. Reminiscent of Neo-platonic thinking, Trevelyan views the material world as the creation of a single transcendent principle that has divided itself into a hierarchy of levels. Earth matter constitutes the "lowest, densest vibration" of this single source. Trevelyan considers the division of reality to be holistic arguing that the "subtler planes traverse and interpenetrate the denser". It would be more accurate to describe Trevelyan's framework, with Rudolph's words on ancient Gnosticism, "dualism on a monistic background".²⁵ Trevelyan says that through its descent into matter, humanity "lost all knowledge, all recollection, of the reality of higher worlds and of the hierarchy of planes of being". It "lost both spirit and God". Humanity descended into the physical plane to "experience separation from the Divine Will", and through the development of higher levels of consciousness, will find its way back. The earth is "the chosen training ground of the soul". Humans have become lost in this plane, under the influence of evil entities which have created a world order that denies the higher realities of spirit. Humans have become totally engrossed in the "fascinatingly beautiful realm of matter". Human birth has become "a kind of death, a descent into the prison or tomb of the body and personality and the five senses...a drastic limitation of the free-ranging spirit".

The emerging New Age of Aquarius will mean human liberation from the prison of the body. The "angelic powers" receive the leading role in the creation of a new level of human existence, and will in fact be responsible for the imminent apocalypse which Trevelyan refers to as the "cleansing". Such an apocalypse holds no fear for Trevelyan, because "death...is an illusion, for the 'I' is immortal and imperishable". Therefore, he says, "Let us admit that a great tidal wave would be the quickest way to the New Jerusalem!" For Trevelyan, the destiny of the human is to transcend the restrictions of the body and of the earth. In a mood of extreme anthropocentrism, he calls his followers to "eject the animal nature from our soul. The hyena in us, the wolf, the snake, the fox, needs to be sublimated and transmuted. As man, we need to rise above these qualities."²⁶

Ramtha

Across the Atlantic, the wisdom of a 35,000 year-old warrior from Lemuria called Ramtha, is channelled by J.Z. Knight. Channelling, similar to mediumship, is the New Age practice of receiving communications from disembodied sources. Channels or channellers receive revelations from a wide range of sources, including spirit guides, ascended masters, animals, fairies, angels, extraterrestrials, the "Akashic records", and even "Barbie doll", described by her channel as being "the polyethylene essence who is 700 million teaching entities".²⁷ Melton *et al.* point out that some channelled entities have the sole

purpose of guiding humanity towards its "awakening", and link such entities with "the Buddhist tradition of the Bodhisattva".²⁸ Similarly, in Gnosticism, the saviour or illuminator descends from the world beyond to reveal the gnosis that will liberate humanity from its bonds to physical existence.

Ramtha declares that he has come to remind humans of a knowledge they have forgotten, that "you are, indeed, divine and immortal entities". God in fact has "never been outside of you; it is you...the supreme intelligence that lies forgotten but ever-present within man". Every individual is a particle of the absolute, a knowledge lost when humans "became so immersed in the illusion of this plane". Here, Ramtha introduces a new element in Gnostic thinking: humans are not helpless recipients of this material Hell, they are its creators. Humans have been conditioned to think of themselves as limited, finite beings, victims of fate and circumstance. Yet the truth is that you "have created every reality in your life". The power that has enabled individuals to create their limitations can be used to "create unlimitedness". Thus, there are no real "victims" in life; no one "is ever born a victim of fate or circumstance. Entities born directly into sickness, impairment in their bodies, or wretched conditions, have chosen that for themselves". This is each entity's "divine right". Although Ramtha's message does not regard material existence as evil, it is still devalued in that it is viewed as being little more than a pliable extension of consciousness. Further, there are no moral truths: "Everything is true", declares Ramtha, "because whatever one thinks...is reality in his kingdom...Everyone is right, because everyone is a god who has the freedom to create his own truth". Truth "is optional...all are gods who create truth according to their freedom of will". As in patriarchal theology, there is little indication in Ramtha's message that the earth is our home. Ramtha declares that the "true kingdom is not this plane of matter, but the kingdom of thought and emotion that created and gives meaning to this plane".²⁹ Ramtha's notion of the self as an immortal entity that can create its own reality, and of the external world as illusory and under the power of this self, is mirrored in the therapies and management training programmes associated with the human potential movement.³⁰

"The Tag-End of Gnosticism, Platonism, and Cartesianism"

Given the examples above, it comes as little surprise that researchers like Collins have described the New Age movement as "the tag-end of Gnosticism, Platonism, and Cartesianism"; a transitional phenomenon that signifies "the decline and fall of a cultural epoch"; a "sign of decay rather than the beginning of a new era".³¹ Ecofeminists would concur, but add that 'Gnosticism, Platonism, and Cartesianism' are themselves manifestations of alienated patriarchal consciousness, characterised by value-hierarchical dualisms, and a separatist, anti-ecologic view of the self. This is only one aspect, for in New Age ecological theology it is precisely Gnosticism, Platonism and Cartesianism that are rejected.

Ecological Theology

'Ecological' theology indicates more than merely concern with the relationships among organisms and their physical environment, although this concern is certainly expressed by those who embrace the ecological theology. The term

'ecological' is used in a broader sense, to highlight the key structural assumptions which underlie this type of New Age thinking. There are at least three ecological aspects. First, the earth is regarded as humanity's true home. It is appropriate to describe such a theology as ecological in that ecology is, literally, the study of our house, or *oikos*. Ecological theology cares little for the belief that there is a transcendent occult realm by which humans are guided or to which they should return. Keller articulates the basic stance of this New Age dynamic when she says: "We need no new heaven and Earth. We have this Earth, this sky, this water to renew."³² From its sense of belonging to the world, ecological theology proposes a distinctive vision of what 'spiritual' life means. The spiritual is of, rather than in opposition to nature, passions, the body, the earth. An ecological stance rejects atheism, but it also rejects belief in the supernatural; divinity is seen as being located within the cosmos itself. Salvation means reconciliation with ourselves and with this world. Death is viewed as complementary and integral to life, not as the wages of sin or the gateway to a better, disembodied existence. Second, the ecological dynamic affirms the fundamental interrelatedness and interdependence of all living systems. From this sense of unity flow new ideas about the self, which is not a fixed isolated entity, but a process. Finally, the ecological dynamic recognises the importance of diversity. Two examples will be discussed to illustrate these points: the creation-centred spirituality of Matthew Fox, and feminist Wicca or Witchcraft.

Creation Spirituality

Over the last decade 'creation-centred spirituality' has been linked with the work of Matthew Fox, formerly a Dominican, although his ideas resonate with those of other Christian theologians aligned with feminist and process perspectives, including Ruether, Berry,³³ and Jay McDaniel.³⁴ Certain themes in creation spirituality also accord well with those in the liberation theologies of the Third World.³⁵ The contemporary creation spirituality movement is truly international in scope, with 'regional connectors' in North America, Canada, Australia, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Ireland, Nepal, New Zealand, and Peru. St. James's Church in London is the networking centre for Britain, and provides a list of more than 70 contacts.

For Fox, creation spirituality is not merely a contemporary Christian movement, but a neglected tradition that has stood in the shadow of a dominant 'fall/redemption' tradition. Previous members of this tradition include the Rhineland mystics of medieval Europe, Jesus, and the earliest tradition of the Hebrew Bible. Fox suggests that feminist Wicca and the spiritualities of Native cultures around the world are consistent with the creation-centred perspective. This view is also held by Berry, who adds that mainstream Western Christianity has much to learn from the indigenous cultures of the world. He places particular emphasis on the ecological character of Native American spirituality which exemplifies the sort of mystique that is necessary "to reorient the consciousness of the present occupants of the North American continent toward a reverence for the earth, so urgent if the bio-systems of the continent are to survive".³⁶

A dominant theme in creation spirituality is that the cosmos is not a fallen reality divorced from divinity, but the ongoing word of God. It is not an

impediment to knowing God, but is the revelation of God, the "primary sacrament". The "spiritual life" is understood as a return to "humility" which Fox interprets as being in touch "with one's earthiness, and to celebrate the blessing that our earthiness, our sensuality, and our passions are".³⁷ A celebration of our roots in the earth is also a celebration of our roots in the cosmos, for creation spirituality affirms that the cosmos is home to the human and intertwined with the human. This sense of 'belonging' is captured by Fox when he writes: "Our story is in no way separate from the cosmic story; Earth is a child of the cosmos and we are children of Earth. Trees, plants and flowers are offspring of the universe and our destinies are intertwined with theirs, and thus with the universe as a whole."³⁸ In tandem with the emphasis on interrelatedness is the abandonment of dualistic, separatist notions of the self. "Relation", declares Fox, "is the essence of everything that exists—not substance, not thingness—but relation". A more expansive sense of selfhood prompts new ideas about compassion and justice. Fox says that "compassion as feeling sorry for others is explicitly rejected in creation theology precisely because in a panentheistic world view there is no other". Further, as humanity is but one strand in the interconnected web of life, "compassion and justice-making...can in no way be restricted to relations among the two-legged ones".³⁹

Feminist Wicca

The second example of New Age ecological theology is feminist Wicca or Witchcraft. It can be considered as the 'spiritual' component of the ecofeminist movement or a type of 'Goddess spirituality'. From another angle, it is but one 'path' within modern Witchcraft, and Witchcraft itself is part of the Neo-Pagan revival. As in creation spirituality, Neo-Pagan writers like Crowley assert that the Western Neo-Pagan revival, with its emphasis on the sacredness of the earth, is coextensive with a return to traditional 'earth' religions evident in Africa and elsewhere.⁴⁰

Although sometimes viewed as a distinctly American phenomenon, feminist Witchcraft and other forms of Goddess worship have found followers in Britain, with groups like the Fellowship of Isis and the Matriarchy Research and Reclaim Network, and with periodicals like *from the flames* and *Pandora's Jar*. In feminist Wicca, the word 'Witch' is being reclaimed as a source of power, and to indicate allegiance to the victims of patriarchal oppression throughout history. Lucy O'Brien, a journalist, reports that in former Yugoslavia, women who are critical of the government are vilified, imprisoned, and accused of being 'Witches'; as a mark of solidarity, young women wear badges inscribed with the word 'Hexe' or 'Witch'.⁴¹

A hallmark of Neo-Paganism is its appreciation of diversity. According to Adler, Neo-Paganism "stands against all the dogmatic religious and political views that dominate our society".⁴² This attitude is reflected in the views of feminist Wiccans like Starhawk, who says that Wiccans have "no dogma, no authorised texts or beliefs and no authoritative body to authorise anything".⁴³ In what way does the 'appreciation of diversity' differ from the separatist view of the self and the call to 'create your own reality' in patriarchal spirituality? The difference is fundamental: the call to create your own reality is based on the belief that the true self is not in any sense connected to its surrounding

environmental or cultural context, and is essentially the only authority that should be recognised. This sense of separation is made explicit by Trevelyan: "This is what things look like to me. If it doesn't seem like that to you, you don't have to accept what I say. Only accept what rings true to your own Inner Self."⁴⁴ By contrast, in ecological spirituality, the key motivation to encourage diversity is an 'ecological' one. As Starhawk says: "In ecological systems, the greater the diversity of a community, the greater is its resilience and adaptability in the face of change."⁴⁵ Another Neo-Pagan supporter of diversity is Rufus Maychild, editor of *Pandora's Jar*, who suggests that Pagans should reject impersonal notions like 'universal responsibility' and 'globalism', which are fronts for global management, and return to "a tribal, bioregional consciousness". A British Neo-Pagan, Maychild justifies his tribal bio-regionalism with reference to the spirituality of indigenous peoples. Commenting on an article which suggests that the removal of indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands destroys their spirituality, he says, "if this applies to traditional, tribal peoples, why doesn't it apply to us [Pagans] too?"⁴⁶

Moreover, the emphasis on diversity does not indicate a total lack of cohesiveness within the Neo-Pagan movement, for there are a number of fundamental assumptions or 'ground rules' embraced by feminist Wiccans and most other Neo-Pagans. Most are polytheists, or animists or pantheists, and share the goal of living in harmony with nature. They see humanity's advancement and separation from nature as a prime source of alienation, and see ritual as a means to end it.

The focal point of Wiccan worship is the Goddess, understood as the divinity of the world and cosmos, rather than a deity 'out there'. By placing the locus of ultimate meaning and value within the world, rather than above, feminist Wicca hopes to engender a new attitude of reverence that will reconcile humans with the earth. The Goddess, according to Starhawk, "calls us to live our spirituality here in the world, to take action to preserve the life of the earth".⁴⁷ There is virtually no notion of an ascent of the soul in feminist spirituality. Budapest writes that the essence of earth religions is "common sense that glorifies practical things and the improvement of our lives right now, not later after death, which is absurd".⁴⁸ Again, like ecology, feminist Wicca recognises that the world is an interconnected and interdependent web of processes and events. This is particularly apparent in Wiccan ethics. Starhawk argues that a Wiccan would not steal—not because of some admonition in a sacred book—but because everyone is linked to the same social fabric, and therefore "those who steal also pay higher prices for groceries, insurance, taxes...an act that harms anyone harms us all".⁴⁹ This seems very different from a separatist vision of the self which says that everyone creates his/her own reality.

Problems in Making Ideal Distinctions

I have argued that the New Age movement contains two very different theological dynamics—the patriarchal and the ecological. Given the almost antithetical nature of these theological positions, the question arises why some researchers and some New Age spokespersons have maintained that the New Age is distinguished by, to use Chandler's phrase, "a common vision, a shared world-view about the nature of existence and the purpose of life in the cosmos".⁵⁰

There are at least four reasons for this. First, the New Age, as Palmer suggests, is very much a publishing phenomenon, and both publishers and bookshops have found the New Age rubric an excellent opportunity to bring together a disparate range of subjects.⁵¹ Anyone attempting to find out about the New Age movement via their local bookshop will find works like Sjoon and Mor's *The Great Cosmic Mother* sharing shelf-space with publications that convey an almost antithetical message.

Second, Spangler, a New Age theorist and spokesperson, observes that it is within the "glamour" New Age—i.e. the dualistic, apocalyptic and "occult" elements of the New Age—that the term 'New Age' is most often used.⁵² Thus, many New Age visionaries no longer wish to be identified with the movement. Also, the movement itself "is being defined"—particularly by the media—by its "most sensational and bizarre" elements.⁵³ It could be argued that some research on the New Age is founded on or at least influenced by partial images of what the movement actually is; and indeed, this seems to be the case. For New Age theorists like Capra, feminism and feminist theory have a crucial role to play in the emerging "ecological worldview".⁵⁴ Yet, certain commentators can devote chapter upon chapter to a variety of New Age exotica (crystals, channelling, UFOs, etc.), and say little or nothing about feminism. Miller devotes all of one sentence to the feminist critique of patriarchal religion,⁵⁵ and this alongside over 40 pages devoted to channelling.

A third problem is that some New Agers are contradictory, and express beliefs that exist in a state of, to use York's phrase, "unresolved dialectic". A good example of this was observed by an environmental action group during a recent talk by David Icke at the University of Stirling. The talk was an exploration of the relationship between environmental degradation and the dominant religious and scientific belief systems of Western society. As his talk went on however,

some flaws within his argument became apparent. Believing in reincarnation, he sees each person involved in a path of evolution to higher levels of consciousness. But if this is the reality, where is the point in intervening to improve the environment and human relations? Also, his argument was paradoxical in that he favoured people making positive value changes in their lives whilst he also believed that we should always respect the views of others apparently irrespective of their merit.⁵⁶

Similarly, Trevelyan speaks of our need to live in harmony with 'Gaia', but at the same time expresses the belief that our destiny lies in transcendence—transcendence of the body and of the earth. Some argue that such contradictions can be found in feminist Wicca. "Pushed one way", comments Albanese, the Goddess "celebrates the reality, the concreteness, of matter". But pushed another way "she tells us that matter is only a form of energy". Wicca believes in a "world that is real" but also "a world that is unreal".⁵⁷ Another area of contradiction in feminist Wicca concerns its beliefs about post-mortem existence. Budapest, as already quoted, believes that the "essence" of all earth religions is "common sense that glorifies practical things and the improvement of our lives right now". In the Craft "there is no division between body and soul" and "All is Nature". Contradicting this, Budapest states that death should be "considered a door leading into a new life"; it signifies the "exit of the soul from the physical

body". Free from the body, the soul may either attain "liberation" or be reincarnated into another physical body. When choosing new parents "we indeed have an opportunity to be born to those who can help us develop our spirits higher", but, concludes Budapest, "be careful whom you choose. You are the one who must live with it".⁵⁸ Some feminist Wiccans have become increasingly sensitive to and critical of such inconsistencies;⁵⁹ this may suggest that the movement is developing slowly in the direction of a more consistent 'numinous materialism', characteristic of ecofeminists like Ruether and Christ.

Fourth, commentators tend to focus on 'universal' New Age ideas (like monism, gnosis, and self-realisation) and not on the frameworks (patriarchal and ecological) within which these ideas are structured. Although the New Age movement as a whole seems to share what Heelas calls "a fundamental lingua franca",⁶⁰ consideration should be given as to how universal beliefs are interpreted differently between both dynamics. Consider five 'universal' New Age beliefs: all is one, cosmic evolution, the creative potential of the human, the divinity of the self, and self-realisation. According to Chandler, the New Age bottom line is "All is One".⁶¹ This may be true, but he makes no attempt to look at the different interpretations of this idea. For some, like Trevelyan, it indicates that the world is but the lowest level of emanation in an interconnected hierarchy that moves from spirit down to matter—this is "dualism on a monistic background". By contrast, the ecological dynamic embraces a "horizontal" or naturalistic understanding of monism, which indicates both the unity and the sacredness of all life without digressing into dualistic hierarchism. As regards the concept of evolution, some picture the "evolutionary process" in terms of an upward march towards the "Ultimate", towards "Omega".⁶² Such an interpretation of evolution tends to be anthropocentric and value-hierarchical.⁶³ On the other hand, some New Agers describe evolution as continuous with the 'new story', with the creative 'adventure' of an open-ended cosmos.⁶⁴ As regards ideas about human nature, the New Age as a whole replaces 'original sin' with 'original blessing' and 'human potential'. We are not "sinful blotches" on creation, declares Fox. 'Sin' is the doctrine of archontic entities, according to Ramtha and other channelled beings. However, in the patriarchal dynamic, the negation of 'original sin' tends towards anti-nomianism, towards a freedom that knows no bounds or directionality. In the ecological dynamic by contrast, the negation of original sin is connected with moving beyond the Western obsession with the separate self, and, as with liberation theology, sin is redefined in structural and relational terms. In both dynamics we find an emphasis on the divinity of the self. We are immortal entities, says Ramtha. We are co-creators with the divine, says Fox. The important difference is that in the patriarchal dynamic, the divinity of the self is viewed in atomistic terms and set against the supposed illusory or corrupt nature of the external world. By contrast, in the ecological dynamic, the divinity of the self is connected with the recovery of dignity and responsibility, the cosmos is holy and divine, the 'primary sacrament'. The charge against Fox that he is a Gnostic (because he asserts the divinity of the self), or that at least, he contradicts himself,⁶⁵ indicates a lack of consideration of Fox's view of the relationship between the divine, the self and the cosmos. Extreme care should be taken over the 'universal' New Age belief in self-realisation. The self to be realised in patriarchal spirituality is a separative or what Cox has called a "concentric" self, where self-realisation is the recovery

of some inner essence that has until then been “covered by layers of encrustation or coiled in compact possibility”. This is a view of the self with only “peripheral interest directed toward the integral enmeshment of the self in its society, its cosmos and the other immense tracteries within which it lives”.⁶⁶ By contrast, self-realisation in the ecological dynamic is a movement outwards into the body, the community, and the environment. Those in the ecological dynamic express views akin to those of deep ecologist Warwick Fox, who defines self-realisation as a “this-worldly realisation of as expansive a sense of self as possible”,⁶⁷ where protection of the environment emerges, not out of a sense of duty or moral obligation, but from a sense of identification.

Conclusion

The factors outlined above highlight the problems involved in attempting to draw a clear demarcation line between two very different types of New Age theology. Perhaps the most significant problem is that New Agers can be contradictory at times. The patriarchal/ecological typology should therefore be seen primarily as a heuristic model of the two ‘poles’ of the New Age movement. At one end we would find the unmitigated dualism of groups like the Lectorium Rosicrucianum, and at the other the consistent numinous materialism of ecofeminist Goddess worshippers like Christ, for whom divinity “is life, death, and change.”⁶⁸ Between the Lectorium and Christ exist many others who show ‘tendencies’ towards either pole.

Can anything positive be derived from the dialectical tension that exists between these two extremes? At a first glance this appears ludicrous, as, from an ecofeminist viewpoint, a separative view of the self, a desire to transcend the finite limits of human existence, the view that the world is not our true ‘home’, and the positing of hierarchical ontologies with various disembodied constructs at their summit, are all part of a patriarchal consciousness, which is precisely what ecofeminists seek to deconstruct and abandon. Yet, in their reaction against such thinking, ecofeminists should be careful not to dismiss everything. For example, there is a tendency, particularly among radical feminist Wiccans, to confine ideas about divinity to the experiences of women. This may be a healthy corrective to confining them to the experiences and aspirations of men, but, as King points out, the human vision of the divine cannot be limited to the experiences of motherhood and birth. Such experiences are only some “of the many possible expressions and manifestations of the Divine within and around us”.⁶⁹ The pantheism of Fox—which emphasises not only the cataphatic but also the apophatic nature of the divine—may serve as a corrective to limiting visions of divinity to human experience alone. Similarly, is the view that we are not truly at ‘home’ always indicative of contempt for the cosmos and a desire to transcend the earth and everything organic? While noting that the theme of ‘cosmic homelessness’ pervades many religious traditions and that it can easily be interpreted as “a demand to move beyond the ensnarements of the physical cosmos”, Haught believes that this “exilic motif” can still be used in a more world-affirming way; that “homelessness” need not coincide with “an environmentally unhealthy cosmic homelessness”. The exilic motif can instead urge us not to get too comfortable with the realities of the present, and thus provide motivation for action. The theme of exile can also be incorporated in the ‘new

story'—the understanding of the cosmos as an ongoing adventure, where our "wanderings" are seen as "continuous with the cosmos itself".⁷⁰

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NOTES

Note: If two dates are given the more recent refers to the print-year of the work/edition used, and the earlier to the first publication date.

1. Drane, J. *What is the New Age Saying to the Church?* London: Marshall Pickering, 1991: 18–19. For an introduction to the various problems involved in studying the New Age, see Lewis, J. R. "Approaches to the Study of the New Age Movement", in Lewis, J. R. & Melton, J. G., eds., *Perspectives on the New Age*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1992: 1–12.
2. Miller, E. *A Crash Course on the New Age Movement: Describing and Evaluating a Growing Social Force*. Sussex: Monarch Publ., 1990/1989: 15.
3. Geisler, N. L. "The New Age Movement". *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 144 (January- March), 1987: 79–104 (quote p. 80).
4. Capra, F., Steindl-Rast, D. & Matus, T. *Belonging to the Universe: New Thinking About God and Nature*. London: Penguin, 1992/1991: 179, 180.
5. Olson, R. E. "Christianity, Coherence, and the New Age Movement". *Christian Scholars Review*, 20(4), 1991: 350–361 (quote p. 352).
6. Bloom, W., ed. *The New Age: An Anthology of Essential Writings*. London: Rider, 1991: xvi.
7. Heelas, P. "The New Age in Cultural Context: The Pre-Modern, the Modern and the Post-Modern". *Religion*, 23(2), 1993: 103–116 (quote p. 105).
8. Schultz, T. "A Personal Odyssey Through the New Age", in Basil, R., ed., *Not Necessarily the New Age: Critical Essays*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1988: 337–358 (quote p. 354).
9. Perry, M. *Gods Within: A Critical Guide to the New Age*. London: SPCK, 1992: 150.
10. York, M. "New Age in Britain: An Overview". *Religion Today: A Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 9(3), 1994: 14–21 (quote p. 16).
11. *ibid.*
12. See Woodhead, L. "Post-Christian Spiritualities". *Religion*, 23(2), 1993: 167–181.
13. See Griffin, D. R., ed. *Sacred Interconnections: Postmodern Spirituality, Political Economy, and Art*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1990.
14. See Albanese, C. L. *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
15. For example, in her keynote address to the 1976 Boston Festival on Women's Spirituality, Barbara Starret declared: "The New age will be the age of the Female. We must consciously will the emergence of that age in ourselves, for it will be born of us. We must break out of and through the old, patriarchal programming, step by step, until this planet is truly free, truly loving, truly power-full." Cited in Roszak, T. *Person/Planet: The Creative Disintegration of Industrial Society*. Herts: Granada, 1981/1977: 73.
16. Sjo, M. *New Age & Armageddon: The Goddess or the Gurus? Towards a Feminist Vision of the Future*. London: The Women's Press, 1992; see also Sjo, M. "New Age and Patriarchy". *Religion Today*, 9 (3), 1994: 22–28. According to Bednarowski, feminist spirituality has "overlapping conversations" with the New Age in terms of cultural critique, values, spirituality and political agendas, but should not be identified completely with the latter. Like York, she notes that certain elements within the New Age are decidedly dualistic, and that some form of distinction is still necessary. See Bednarowski, M. F. "The New Age Movement and Feminist Spirituality: Overlapping Conversations at the End of the Century." Lewis, J. R. & Melton, J. G. eds., *Perspectives on the New Age*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1992: 167–178.

17. Warren, K. J. "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections". *Environmental Ethics*, 9, Spring 1987: 3–20 (quotes pp. 6–7). For a concise introduction to ecofeminism, see Plumwood, V. "Ecofeminism: An Overview and Discussion of Positions and Arguments". Supplement to the *Australian Journal of Philosophy*, 64, June 1986: 120–138.
18. Keller, C. *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986: 1, 9.
19. Stewart, C. Y. "Factors Conditioning the Christian Creation Consciousness", in Joranson, P. N. & Butigan, K., eds., *Cry of the Environment: Rebuilding the Christian Creation Tradition*. Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1984: 107–131 (quote p. 121).
20. Ruether, R. R. *Sexism and God-Talk*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1983: 54, 78–79, 79–80.
21. Ruether, R. R. "Mother Earth and the Megamachine: A Theology of Liberation in a Feminine, Somatic and Ecological Perspective", in Christ, C. P. & Plaskow, J., eds., *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979: 43–52 (quote p. 47).
22. Jonas, H. *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963/1958 (2nd ed.): 110, 147.
23. See Raschke, C. A. *The Interruption of Eternity: Modern Gnosticism and the Origins of the New Religious Consciousness*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1980; Bergeron, R. "Towards a Theological Interpretation of the New Religions", in Coleman, J. & Baum, G., eds., *New Religious Movements*. Concilium series No. 161, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983: 74–80.
24. All quotations taken from van Rijckenborgh, J. *The Gnosis in Present-Day Manifestation*. Haarlem: Rosycross Press, 1980, and a series of five "Introductory Letters" (n.d.) obtained from the Lectorium's centre in Surrey.
25. Rudolph, K. *Gnosis: The Nature and History of an Ancient Religion*. Robert McLachlan Wilson, trans. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983/1977: 58.
26. All quotations taken from Trevelyan, G. *A Vision of the Aquarian Age: The Emerging Spiritual World View*. Walpole, NH: Stillpoint Publishing, 1984, and Trevelyan, G. *Operation Redemption: A Vision of Hope in an Age of Turmoil*. Walpole, NH: Stillpoint Publishing, 1985/1981.
27. Leedham, R. "A Plastic Passion Play". *The Guardian*, 11 September, 1993: 76.
28. Melton, J. G., Clark, J. & Kelly, A. A. *New Age Almanac*. Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1991: 50.
29. All quotations from Weinberg, S. L., ed., *Ramtha: An Introduction*. Eastsound, WA: Sovereignty Inc., 1989/1988.
30. For critical responses to the human potential movement's perception of the self and its relation to its external environment, see Friedman, M. "Aiming at the Self: The Paradox of Encounter and the Human Potential Movement". *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 16 (2), 1976: 5–34, and Adams, R. & Haaken, J. "Anticultural Culture: Lifespring's Ideology and Its Roots in Humanistic Psychology". *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 27 (4), 1987: 501–517.
31. Collins, P. "What's New about the New Age?" *St. Mark's Review* 144, Summer 1991: 10–14 (quotes pp. 14, 12).
32. Keller, C. "Women Against Wasting the World: Notes on Eschatology and Ecology", in Diamond, I. & Orenstein, Feman, G., eds., *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990: 249–263 (quote p. 263).
33. See Berry, T. *The Dream of the Earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990/1988.
34. See McDaniel, J. B. *Earth, Sky, Gods & Mortals: Developing an Ecological Spirituality*. Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publ., 1990.
35. For an account of Fox's own views on the relationship between creation spirituality and liberation theology see Fox, M. *Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth*. San Francisco: Harper, 1991.
36. Berry, op. cit., p. 184.
37. Fox, M. *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality*. Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1983: 59.
38. Fox, M. "Sacred Origins". *Resurgence*, 61, November/December 1993: 52–53 (quote p. 52).
39. Fox, M. "Creation-Centred Spirituality From Hildegard of Bingen to Julian of Norwich: 300 Years of an Ecological Spirituality in the West", in Joranson, P. N. & Butigan, K. eds., *Cry of the Environment: Rebuilding the Christian Creation Tradition*. Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1984: 85–106 (quotes pp. 100, 101).
40. Crowley, V. *Phoenix from the Flame: Pagan Spirituality in the Western World*. London: Aquarian, 1994: 10.
41. O'Brien, L. "The Wild Woman Within". *Everywoman*, February 1994: 13–15 (quote p. 13).
42. Adler, M. *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986/1979 (revised & expanded ed.): viii.

43. Starhawk. "Feminist, Earth-Based Spirituality and Ecofeminism", in Plant, J., ed., *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*. London: Green Print, 1989: 174–185 (quote p. 175).
44. Cited in Perry, op. cit., p. 147.
45. Starhawk. *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1990/1982 (new edition): 38.
46. Maychild, R. B. "Editorial". *Pandora's Jar*, 4, Winter 1992: 2.
47. Starhawk. *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*. San Francisco: Harper, 1989/1979 (10th anniversary edition): 40.
48. Budapest, Z. *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries*. Oakland, CA: Wingbow Press, 1992/1980: xii.
49. Starhawk, 1989/1979: 27.
50. Chandler, R. *Understanding the New Age*. Milton Keynes: Word UK, 1989/1988: 27. One solution, as noted in reference to Bednarowski and York, is to make a distinction between the New Age and Neo-Paganism/feminist spirituality. One problem with this is that leading feminist Neo-Pagan figures, like Crowley, present both themselves and Wicca as being 'New Age'. Another problem, as acknowledged by York, is that "increasingly paganism is becoming recognised along with both Eastern mysticism/human potential and the theosophical-occult/spiritualist-psychoic/new thought metaphysics mix as one of the main constituents within the New Age". Indeed, York's division between the New Age and Neo-Paganism seems to contradict his earlier—and possibly more accurate—characterisation of the New Age as a "battlefield of voices", each competing to establish itself as "the official version of the New Age". See York, M. O. "A Sociological Profile on the New Age and Neo-Pagan Movements", unpublished PhD thesis, King's College, University of London, July 1991: 107, 17.
51. Palmer, M. *Coming of Age: An Exploration of Christianity and the New Age*. London: Aquarian, 1993: p. 25.
52. Spangler, D. *The Rebirth of the Sacred*. London: Gateway, 1984: 79.
53. Spangler, D. and Thompson, W. I. *Reimagination of the World: A Critique of the New Age, Science, and Popular Culture*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Co., 1991: 30.
54. Capra argues that the feminist spirituality movement is "creating a new self-image for women, along with new modes of thinking and a new system of values". It "will have a profound influence not only on religion and philosophy but also on our social and political life". Capra, F. *The Turning Point: Science, Society and the Rising Culture*. London: Fontana, 1990/1982: 463.
55. It reads: "There is a growing attraction in New Age circles to an 'earth mother' deity, as opposed to a heavenly Father". Miller, op. cit., p. 30. Such distortions are evident even in some of the more scholarly studies on the movement. For example, Ellwood argues that the New Age constitutes a "modern revival" of the "alternative spirituality of the West", by which he means a "basically Neo-platonic concept of a hierarchical universe" in which "spirit" is viewed as "the superior and autonomous formative element wedded here below to matter". However, the impression left by New Age visionaries like Fox is that the West has had more than its fair share of Neo-platonic thinking, and that the leading spirituality of a New Age will certainly not be more of the same. See Ellwood, R. "How New is the New Age?", in Lewis, James R. & Melton, J. G. eds., *Perspectives on the New Age*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1992: 59–67 (quotes pp. 59, 60).
56. University of Stirling Environmental Action Group, Terra-Nova, Summer 1994, No. 7.
57. Albanese, op. cit., pp. 179–180, 183.
58. Budapest, op. cit., pp. xii, xxv, 90, 92, 97, 98.
59. See for example the article entitled "Of WEN and Vron". *From the flames: a quarterly journal of radical feminist spirituality, magic and the goddess* 8, Winter 1992: 28–29.
60. Heelas, op. cit., p. 104.
61. Chandler, op. cit., p. 28.
62. The view that the universe is evolving towards some final end point or ultimate state of consciousness is expressed by many writers associated with the New Age. See for example Teilhard de Chardin, P. *The Phenomenon of Man*. London: Fontana, 1965/1955; Wilber, K. *Up From Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution*. Boston: Shambhala, 1986/1981; Russell, P. *The Awakening Earth: The Global Brain*. London: Arkana, 1991/1982 (revised edition).
63. For criticisms of this type of hierarchical and anthropocentric evolutionary theology—which has been aptly labelled 'Gnosticized Darwinism'—see Fox, W. *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism*. Boston: Shambhala, 1990; Roszak, T. *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology*. London: Bantam, 1993/1992; Toulmin, S. *The Return*

- to *Cosmology: Postmodern Science and the Theology of Nature*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982; Goldsmith, E. *The Way: An Ecological World-View*. London: Rider, 1992; Rothberg, D. "Philosophical Foundations of Transpersonal Psychology: An Introduction to Some Basic Issues". *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 18 (1), 1986: 1-34.
64. An introduction to the 'new story' can be found in chapter 10 of Berry's *The Dream of the Earth*; see also Haught, J. F. "Religious and Cosmic Homelessness: Some Environmental Implications", in Birch, C., Eakin, W. & McDaniel, J. B., eds. *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*. New York: Orbis, 1990.
 65. For such a misunderstanding see the 'soteriology' section in Noble, C. "Matthew Fox's Cosmic Christ—A Critical Response". *Crux*, 27 (1), 1991: 21-29 (esp. p. 25).
 66. Cox, H. *Turning East: The Promise and the Peril of the New Orientalism*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1977: 82, 77.
 67. Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*, p. 204.
 68. See Christ, C. P. "Rethinking Theology and Nature", in Plaskow, J. and Christ, C. P., eds., *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*. San Francisco: Harper, 1989: 314-325.
 69. King, U. *Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest & Promise*. London: MacMillan, 1993/1989 (second edition): 143.
 70. Haught, op. cit., pp. 160-161, 172, 175.